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The Fractured 'I': Nationalism, Irish Cultural Politics and the Quest for a Unified Poetic Self in the Letters of W. B. Yeats (1892–1939)

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Abstract

Letters have an important role in unravelling various forms of negotiations operative within the self of a poet. This paper intends to show how Yeats's letters intrinsically bear on his poetic as well as political life. The first-person narrator that Yeats uses in his letters is a polyvalent one that constantly re-positions itself vis-à-vis the changing political and cultural milieu of Ireland. The aim of this paper is to situate the subjective 'I' of Yeats's letters in the changing matrix of Ireland's cultural and political context and thereby to bring out the intersectionality of his personal, political and poetic selves. Yeats's letters, with their inherent open-endedness, unfold different possibilities of self-making within Yeats's poetic oeuvre and thereby challenge the possibility of a uniform, straightforward, ideologically convenient paradigm of biographization.

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Introduction

In spite of a large gamut of critical articles on his poetry, drama, non-fiction and biographical aspects, Yeats's letters substantially lack critical engagement. In spite of their relative inferiority in status as non-literary works, letters have an important role in unravelling various forms of negotiations operative within the self of a poet. By referring to these aspects of Yeats's letters, this paper intends to show how Yeats's letters intrinsically bear on his poetic as well as political life. A nuanced reading of his letters emerging from different phases of his career can unravel how the first-person narrator that he uses in his letters is not a stable, unitary one. The subjective 'I' that Yeats adopts in his letters is a polyvalent one that constantly re-positions itself vis-à-vis the changing political and cultural milieu of Ireland. In other words, the aim of this paper is to situate the subjective 'I' of Yeats's letters in the changing matrix of Ireland's cultural and political context and thereby to bring out the intersectionality of his personal, political and poetic selves.

It is a fact well acknowledged that letters, alongside autobiography or other forms of historical narrative, have a functional role to play in bringing out the traces of minor or unimportant incidents in the palimpsest-like life narrative of a cult, iconic historical figure. No wonder an iconic poet like W. B. Yeats has had so many biographies and accounts written to scrutinize his life from various perspectives. Most of them have read Yeats's life on the basis of his literary works, memoirs and autobiography; references to his letters were mostly incidental and negligible. However, the way the question of subjectivity is constantly re-positioned and re-negotiated in his letters deserves critical attention, to demystify how

different emotional impulses like agony, helplessness, despair, delight, optimism and faith play with each other in the texts of his letters. A. Norman Jeffares very aptly puts it: "The contents of these various volumes of letters demonstrate the multiplicity of Yeats's interests, which go far beyond his virtually continuous occupation with writing" (xii). The multiplicity of interests, interspersed with the multiplicity of role-playing as a poet, lover, theatre-persona and politician, implies the presence of a hybridized performative identity in Yeats's letters. The way this performativity is revealed and reinforced through his letters can be an interesting area of exploration.

Letters and the Narrativization of the Self

Letters, although used as documents of personal communication, always remain subject to various ideological distortions. These documents have an important role to play in narrativizing the self. The politics of narrativization is not free from different political and cultural influences. The self, remaining implicated in the narratives, negotiates its status in relation to various psychosocial and ethnographic ideals. Letters, resultantly, emerge as a discursive site where layers of relationship between the private and the public, the personal and the political aspects of self are both contested and negotiated. The politics of narrativizing the self in letters differs significantly from autobiography in its approach and thematic content. While autobiography is marked by the "belatedness of memory," as Freud would term it, which inevitably results in re-structuring the present (see Laplanche and Pontalis 111–14), letters offer a narrative that is written from the perspective of the present. The traces of past memory, however, cannot be entirely undermined. Letter-writers simultaneously recapitulate and express their experiences as they write their letters, but this

interpretation occurs in the midst of the narrative, before the finality of experiences is known. As a whole, letters as a form belong to a very tangled temporal state where the past, the present and the future interpenetrate each other in a very complex, indefinable manner without any necessary closure. Janet Altman, working on the general tendency of letter writing, very aptly puts it: "the letter writer is always in dialogue with a possible respondent," and "any letter appears as part of a potentially ongoing sequence" (148).[1] Letters foreclose the possibility of a simplistic sense of an ending, so to speak. The self always remains in a kind of dialogue with the other, and this dialogue, with its unpredictability and contingency, plays a key role in determining the narratives of letters. Moreover, what determines the epistolary form is, as Brown and Levinson term it, "face wants" (61–64). By "face wants" they foreground the self-conscious politics of self-making always operative in the narratives of a letter. However, as Goffman argues, a person's face is not a constant, fixed entity; it is in need of frequent reaffirmation from those around us ("On Face-Work" 5–10). So the narratives in letters actually remain susceptible to various other influences and never remain in a fixed position.

Foucault writes in his famous essay "What Is an Author?" that the "author function" "is characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society"; the figure of the author is "located in the break that founds a certain discursive construct" (107–08). He shows how a sum total of many functional selves contributes to the formation of authorial identity. This interplay of many selves not only forecloses the possibility of interpreting the author's life from a singular, universally acceptable perspective but also opens up spaces for relatively unimportant documents like

letters to come into consideration to re-discover and re-construct the author figure from the layers of opinions and interpretations. The aim of this paper is to show how the subjective 'I' in Yeats's letters emerges as a shifting signifier and becomes part of many discourses. Letters significantly delve into the nuances of Yeats's personal, political and poetic life, their convergence as well as divergence.

Nation, Folklore and the Early Letters

Michael Mays in an article aptly puts it: "… despite modernism's insistence upon its own unfettered freedom is a measure of the degree to which it was already inscribed within the national paradigm it sought to transcend" (22). For a figure like Yeats, this nationalistic fervour is very much present in the letters of his initial career. This nationalistic zeal gets integrally related to his project of cultural and literary revival. To revive the lost literary and cultural tradition, the primary agenda of Yeats is to restore the folkloric tradition of Ireland. His search for an alternative idiom of Irish poetry is embedded in his study of folklore and mysticism. His *The Wanderings of Oisin* (1889) set forth the tradition of Irish poetry. Stylistically, his letters of this phase bear the stamp of a calm, serene, peaceful Romantic aesthetic which he was aiming to integrate into his poetic sensibilities. His inclination to mysticism and the occult can also be traced as a part of this agenda; in a letter to John O'Leary in 1892 he calls the mystical life "the centre of all that I do & all that I think & all that I write" (Yeats, *Collected Letters* 1: 303). His *Letters to the New Island*, a compilation of his contributions to two American newspapers, the *Boston Pilot* and the *Providence Sunday Journal*, between the years 1888 and 1892, also gives vent to this ideology of forging a unity between national culture and national literature.[2] In one of these pieces he writes: "There is

no great literature without nationality, no great nationality without literature" (Yeats, *Letters to the New Island* 30). Apart from this fervent nationalistic zeal, what is most prominent in these letters is his articulation of a distinct cultural ethos and a call for the rejection of the trite intellectualism of British poetry for an alternative cultural and literary identity of Ireland.

Theatre, Conscience and the Masses, 1900–1908

The quest for an "Irish subject" that constitutes the crux of Yeats's letters in the early phase, and the fervent nationalistic zeal that lent it support, receive a jolt later, in the aftermath of the fall and death of Charles Stewart Parnell in 1891. But his obsession with poetry gets transformed into a desire for developing an Irish national theatre in the subsequent phase of his life, which was marked by the presence of Lady Gregory and Maud Gonne. This phase seems to begin in 1900 and continues till 1908. The reason for his shift to theatre from poetry was also explained in his letters. In a letter to Frank Fay he wrote: "Remember however that epic and folk literature can ignore time as drama cannot—Helen never ages, Cuchulain never ages" (qtd. in Jeffares 117). This tension between the timelessness of epic and folk characters and the temporal demands of drama attracted him a lot, as did his desire to engage with the mass politics of Irish society. John Kelly's comment on Yeats's increasing fascination for drama seems pertinent: "Yeats' deepening interest in drama exerted another set of pressures that had reshaped his art, causing changes in techniques and new perceptions of his relationship with audience" (J. Kelly xliv). However, his relationship with Irish theatre and its politics was, in fact, a somewhat tortuous one. His communication with Lady Gregory, Maud Gonne, Annie Horniman, his old friend George Russell and J. M. Synge seems to furnish great detail about the unevenness of Yeats's liaison

with Irish theatre. From another angle, what seemed to have influenced Yeats's shift from a secluded poetic life to the busy and bustling life of theatre was perhaps his tempestuous relationship with Maud Gonne, the lady who had always been the woman of desire for Yeats. As is testified recurrently through his letters and memoirs, the personal and the political always remain in close correspondence with each other in the case of Yeats. Despite moments of friction and contradiction, they always went hand in hand, unfolding the various traits of Yeats's personality.

Letters belonging to this phase of 1900–1908 are crucial to trace the increasingly changing dynamics of Yeats's relationship with theatre. In a letter to Laurence Binyon, contemporary poet, dramatist and art historian, on 5 January 1901, Yeats's search for the ritual of "heroic beauty" was recorded (Yeats, *Collected Letters* 3: 6). This search for heroic beauty permeated all through his poetic career till the last phase. A letter to Frank J. Fay on 22 July 1901 discusses the "history of verse speaking in the theatre" (Yeats, *Collected Letters* 3: 93). This letter was particularly relevant to his aspiration for staging his poetic plays with abundant heroic splendour. However, as reflected throughout his poems and letters as well as his memoirs, his heroism was never related to any external display of virility or machismo; rather, it was an inherent force filled with the power of conscience. For him, "…conscience expresses the relation of the soul to eternal beauty and truth …" (J. Kelly 1). In a letter to the editor of the *United Irishman* on 7 December 1901 he describes how literature was to him the "principal voice of conscience" (Yeats, *Collected Letters* 3: 132). A letter to William Thomas Horton in the same year articulated the integral relationship between art and the spiritual life: "…if you cannot force yourself to get over the mechanical and technical difficulties of art

you will in all likelihood fail the spiritual life as well" (Yeats, *Collected Letters* 3: 92). A man of theatre however he was, his faith in spirituality had always been firmly in place. This spirituality and the excessive heroic splendour that he had derived from all the resources of his life, like Irish folklore, Indian philosophy and the Theosophical Society, gave reasons for his poetic contemplations. But what actually made inroads into Yeats's career was his relationship with the Irish masses.

Targeting the mass audience was one of the primary agendas of the Abbey Theatre. From Marjorie Howes's argument, however, it becomes clear that "the theoretical and practical structures of Yeats's early Irish theatre embody his *conflicted* engagement with the idea of national politics as mass politics and his attempts to come to terms with the (potentially) mass character of Irish nationalism in a productive way" (66–67; emphasis added). This inherent conflict played an important role behind the demolition of a great Irish dream of having a refined, culturally superior Irish theatre, the Irish Literary Theatre (1899), which later graduated into the Abbey Theatre (1904) under the auspices of Annie Horniman, Lady Gregory and William Fay. The causes of this failure can be traced back in some of Yeats's letters. In a letter to J. M. Synge in 1906 he wrote about his plan of making themselves "independent of" Miss Horniman (qtd. in Flannery). Moreover, as James W. Flannery shows in an article entitled "W. B. Yeats and the Abbey Theatre Company," internal divisions and conflicts of interest between Lady Gregory, Horniman, Yeats and Fay actually led the dream of an Irish national theatre based on a communitarian ethic completely astray. Apart from this, another aspect which seems to have played an instrumental role in driving a wedge within the Abbey Theatre was obviously its uneasy engagement with the

masses. As we come to know from several of his letters, the protests against *The Countess Cathleen* (1899), the *Playboy* riots (1907) and many disturbing incidents like these had actually a devastating impact on Irish theatre. Howes's study, delving deeper into the paradox of Yeats and his cultural and intellectual coterie, inferred that, despite its avowed claim of bridging cultural barriers, it actually remained self-contained, and that their cultural elitism actually thrived at the expense of mass society. His friend George Russell's letter testifies that Yeats's engagement with the mass society of Ireland was not a very comfortable one: "You are committing the great mistake of so many people about Ireland 'the twenty years of resolute government' theory. Irish people will only be led by their affections. Wake their affection and they will move heaven and earth to help you" (Finneran et al. 1: 153).

The Personal and the Political: Yeats and Maud Gonne

If Yeats's engagement with the Irish theatre was an ambiguous one, so was his engagement with Irish politics. His personal life had an intrinsic role to play in shaping his political career. Admittedly, it is very difficult to segregate various facets of Yeats's personality because of their mutual intersection and assimilation. Given the diversity and eclecticism of Yeats's political career, it is also very difficult to boil it down to a specific ideological structure. Being influenced by the Fenian O'Leary, Parnell and his authoritarian father John Butler Yeats, Yeats was quite understandably in favour of a politics which could bring about and sustain a change in the intellectual and cultural climate of Ireland. His ideological clashes with the nationalists often emanated from his search for an epistemological anchor—a universal paradigm that could accommodate conflicting voices and selves. His letters from different phases of his career emerge as important documents to

trace how modes of rigorous self-questioning, interspersed with an earnest zeal for a universal order, underpin his political philosophy. The Gonne–Yeats letters are very important personal documents of Yeats's life that bear testimony to his highly volatile political career (see Gonne and Yeats). Apart from these, letters to Olivia Shakespear can also be considered pertinent to trace different moves in Yeats's political career.

Despite the integral role of politics, it is very difficult to call Yeats a politician in the exact sense of the term. His political stance, although mostly covert, as expressed through his letters and memoirs, never remained undisclosed. The way Yeats re-fashioned his political ideology vis-à-vis the changing milieu of Irish nationalism and different stages of his personal career is decidedly complex and ambiguous. The influences of Gonne, O'Leary, Olivia Shakespear, Lady Gregory, Parnell and his father John Butler Yeats had been so compelling in Yeats's career that it is perhaps impossible to reconstruct the "real" person out of these discursive layers of texts, which seem to make the author figure a part of a larger discursive matrix. Jalal Uddin Khan in an article clearly traces the "temperamental and ideological differences" present in the Gonne–Yeats relationship. Alluding to the initial phases of the Gonne–Yeats relationship, Khan traces how it was initially a relationship of "irreconcilable political and philosophical differences" (127) but full of heroic passion for overcoming these odds through a self-fulfilling spiritual union. On 26 July 1908 Maud, in one of her letters to Yeats, writes about an astral vision of her union with Yeats, against which "[m]aterial union is but a pale shadow" (Finneran et al. 1: 201). But this relationship never consummated into a full-fledged love affair because of Gonne's lack of interest: "As for Willie Yeats I love him dearly as a friend, but I could not for one

moment imagine marrying him" (qtd. in Balliet 32). His allusion to Maud's husband MacBride as a "drunken, vainglorious lout" (Yeats, "Easter, 1916," line 32) in "Easter, 1916," an extremely problematic poem, and his selection as an Irish Senator in 1922 further strained the relationship. This friction between Yeats and Gonne can be traced in a letter to Olivia where Yeats talks about a letter from Maud: "The day before her arrest she wrote to say that if I did not denounce the Government she renounced my society for ever … She had to choose (perhaps all women must) between broomstick and distaff and she has chosen the broomstick—I mean the witches' hats" (qtd. in Ross 472). Khan again in that essay very interestingly traces Gonne's knack for an "active man" rather than a "contemplative man" like Yeats (135). This was perhaps at the heart of the Gonne–Yeats relationship, always driving a wedge between them in spite of moments of political agreement in the early phase of their careers, as in their support of the Irish Transvaal Brigade in the Boer War. Despite these ideological differences between Gonne and Yeats on grounds of political attitude to nationalism, what had brought them closer to each other was their strong sense of will. Yeats in a letter to Russell writes: "we possess nothing but the will and we must never let the children of vague desire breath upon it" (Yeats, *Collected Letters* 3: 472).

The relationship between Yeats and Gonne was particularly important in Yeats's conceptualization of Irish nationhood and nationality. The relationship can be symptomatically read as Yeats's relationship with the Irish nation. However, this symbolic reading of Maud as a principal driving force behind Yeats's changing relationship with Irish nationalism is simplistic. His play *Cathleen ni Houlihan* becomes an interesting case study to explore this idea in detail. But this relationship actually faltered primarily because of an

inherent ambivalence in the idea of nationhood and national identity. If early Yeats had been expressive of an avid nationalistic zeal marked by cultural revivalism, with an ardent desire for the construction of an autonomous Irish literary tradition independent of the British tradition, late Yeats, especially Yeats after the death of the Fenian leader O'Leary in 1907, became sceptical of the question of the Irish nation and nationalism. Poems like "September 1913" evidently bear testimony to his changed notion of the Irish nation and nationalism. In "Easter, 1916," written in the context of the Easter Rising, although Yeats vociferously praised the sacrifice made by the nationalists, his way of presenting the poet's relationship with the dead rebels in the form of a "mother–child" relationship seemed extremely problematic (Yeats, "Easter, 1916," lines 62–64).[3] Maud Gonne was highly critical of this poem.[4] If this fickleness in terms of ideological standpoint was one of the prime reasons behind Yeats's friction with Gonne, another reason was Gonne herself. Gonne, as a firebrand political revolutionary, seemed to have defiantly challenged any kind of "symbolization" (see Lacan 53–64) or any tameable identity offered to her. In that sense, with a strong independent notion of selfhood, autonomy and ideological loyalty to the Irish nation, she, for Yeats, happened to be the embodiment of the elusive "Real" woman—always beyond the borders of straightforward classification.

The Late Letters: Senate, System and Transcendence

Personal relationships played a major role in shaping the contours of Yeats's political career. Letters from his later political career were often addressed to Olivia Shakespear. Letters to Olivia bear testimony to this phase of Yeats, which as always remains steeped in indeterminacy and ambivalence. In the early and middle stages of Yeats's career he was

obsessed with an immediacy and urgency of developing a self-sustaining Irish literary and cultural tradition, independent of British cultural hegemony. However, the post-1920 phase is epitomized by a quest and relentless striving for transcendence beyond the material frontiers of life and death, to bask in a "tragic joy" that offers pleasure in sadness. Letters and works from this phase offer a seemingly more stable and concrete vision of Yeats, who is more introspective, contemplative and philosophical. This philosophical outlook more often than not caused friction with his political stance—irreducibly diverse and complex.

In this post-1920 phase perhaps the most significant incident in Yeats's career was his selection as an Irish senator in 1922. This precipitated his permanent friction with Maud Gonne—a relationship that survived many odds and adversities before its eventual collapse. In this phase the two most important volumes that Yeats published are *A Vision* (1925) and *The Tower* (1928). These two volumes intrinsically dwell on the dichotomy between the ideas of death, decrepitude and the uncertainties of life on the one hand and an inherent urge for overcoming these strains of mortality and materiality on the other. The "gyre," which emblematizes the circularity of time and history, foreclosing the possibility of absolute closure, becomes the central symbol of Yeats's philosophy. Generated by and borne out of his renewed interest in mysticism and spirituality, this phase witnesses Yeats's connection with Shri Purohit Swami. In a letter written in 1933 to Olivia, Yeats writes: "I have I think of late come to a coherent grasp of reality and whether that will make me write or cease to write I do not know" (qtd. in Mackay 16). In a similar fashion, with more maturity, in 1939, in one of his last letters, Yeats wrote: "When I try to put all into a phrase I say, 'Man can embody truth but he cannot know it.' I must embody it in the completion of my life"

(Yeats, *Letters* 922). In 1936, in a letter to Dorothy Wellesley, Yeats wrote: "Joy is the salvation of the soul. You say we must love, yes but love is not pity. It does not desire to change its object" (Yeats, *Letters* 876). The poetic self of Yeats gets influenced by this change. His Byzantium poems, and poems like "Among School Children" and "Under Ben Bulben," give expression to this tragic joy that he found in his search for "self-realization" as opposed to "liberation" or *mukti*. In a letter to Purohit Swami he writes: "In Karma-Yoga Aphorisms No. 8, you say 'Self realisation is for the few' 'Liberation for many'" (qtd. in Mackay 27). The Swami's retort was exemplary and shaped his ideas of philosophical transcendence and immanence in this phase:

> I think that Jeewan-Mukti should be translated as "liberation in this life or while alive" and Mukti means "Liberation after death". One who has realised the Self completely is endowed with all the powers of omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence, while the other has always to depend upon his God. (qtd. in Mackay 27)

Mask, History and "Tragic Joy"

Very evidently, it can be argued that if Yeats's early career had actually been stirred by the political uprisings of contemporary Ireland, in his late phase he turned inward in order to garner resources and the inner strength to grapple with the possibility of another world war that was about to take place a decade later. This diversity and fluidity of Yeats's stances can be supported by his use of the mask, a common factor that seems to have played a major role in accounting for this irresolvable ambiguity in Yeats. In various letters and memoirs Yeats

writes about the relevance of using mask and anti-mask. The mask, being quite intrinsic to Yeats's political philosophy, plays a major role in radicalizing the idea of his self, which for him was far from being a stable, monolithic and unitary one. We get a mention of the mask in his journal of 1909: "In wise love each divines the high secret self of the other and, refusing to believe in the mere daily self, creates a mirror where the lover or the beloved sees an image to copy in daily life. Love also creates the mask" (Yeats, *Memoirs* 144–45).[5] The mask as a performative trope operates functionally in his political and philosophical ideas as well. In his *Memoirs*, Yeats very categorically states the importance of the mask in an artist's life: "The artist grows more and more distinct, more and more a being in his own right as it were, but more and more loses grasp of the always more complex world." As a result, "some day setting out to find knowledge, like some pilgrim to the Holy Land, he will become the most romantic of all characters. He will play with all masks" (Yeats, *Memoirs* 151–52). The necessity of the mask was to defamiliarize oneself, to accommodate other voices within the "self," to have the freedom from the constraint of the idea of a stable, rational, uniform, singular self-fashioning, and to play many roles at once. It seems to be analogous to the Bakhtinian idea of the carnivalesque (see Bakhtin 10–11), which also talks about the temporary disruption of hierarchies in favour of the creation of a liberatory space where opposite, antithetical impulses can co-exist without contesting each other. Yeats's negotiation of many selves within the boundary of a single body through the use of the mask bears testimony to Yeats's search for that absolute form of reality that actually constitutes the crux of his political philosophy. A personal belief-system was generated out of this search, always propelling him to re-discover and re-negotiate his subject-position vis-à-vis the changing contexts of Irish politics, and that makes him largely an enigmatic figure.

This persistent search for something new, something that is intrinsic to his belief-system, has always haunted Yeats. This search remains grounded in the larger framework and context of European modernism, which always espoused the necessity and possibility of self-renewal while not relieving its practitioners of the burdens of contradiction. His late political views also carry the traces of these contradictions. His scepticism about Irish politics comes to the foreground in a later letter, looking back on 1916: "Perhaps there is nothing so dangerous to a modern state, when politics take the place of theology, as a bunch of martyrs. A bunch of martyrs (1916) were the bomb and we are living in the explosion" (qtd. in Meimandi 149). In later works, he espoused the necessity of even violence as a means of achieving a stable political order, though he had shown his utter disregard for the extremist turn in Irish politics in 1916. In a famous letter to Ethel Mannin on 8 April 1936, Yeats sternly castigated contemporary European politics and remarked how every power group dominates the political scenario, causing suffering to its people:

> [As] my sense of reality deepens, and I think it does with age, my horror at the cruelty of governments grows greater [. . .]. Communist, Fascist, nationalist, clerical, anti-clerical, all are responsible according to the number of their victims. I have not been silent; I have used the only vehicle I possess—verse. If you have my poems by you, look up a poem called The Second Coming. (Yeats, *Letters* 851)

The poem talks about the constant oscillation of gyres as symptomatic of the historical continuity of struggle against the oppression of a totalitarian agency—a beastly force that recurs time and again. His letters too bear testimony to this view of conceptualizing history in

terms of eternally changing relations of power: "History is very simple—the rule of the many, then the rule of the few, day and night, night and day for ever, while in small disturbed nations day and night race" (Yeats, *Letters* 851). However, this pessimism was counterpoised by a realization of an invincible faith in humanity and a "tragic joy" stemming largely from his personal philosophy. The optimism of a "tragic joy" overcoming the triviality of decaying politics, age and dissatisfaction was, in fact, in search of a hero who lived in joy and laughed into the face of death; for Yeats, "the supreme aim is an act of faith and reason to make one rejoice in the midst of tragedy" (Yeats, *Letters* 838). This "tragic joy" in the face of the onslaught on humanity defines later Yeats, especially in poems like "Among School Children."

Yeats's poetics was steeped in indeterminacy, doubts and uncertainties. In a letter to John Masefield in 1930 Yeats quite frustratingly summed up this painful indeterminacy which permeates his personal, poetic and political spheres: "I have always wanted to live in one place and have never managed it yet" (qtd. in Ross 204). This angst and ideological dilemma, being part of the larger modernist aesthetics, was seen in his contemporaries like Eliot and Ezra Pound as well. This radical indeterminacy, however, leads him to assert his faith in humanity. Cuchulain was the figure whom Yeats conceptualized as a larger-than-life, heroic character to bring about the necessary political changes in Ireland. But in 1939 he completed *The Death of Cuchulain*,[6] which also symbolically foreshadows his death in the same year. His last poems, to mention a few like "Under Ben Bulben," cast a mockery on death and call for a tragic grandeur. His letter to Ethel Mannin in October 1938 encapsulates his notion of life and death in the later phase:

> My "private philosophy" is there but there must be no sign of it; all must be like an old faery tale. It guides me to certain conclusions and gives me precision but I do not write it. To me all things are made of the conflict of two states of consciousness, beings or persons which die each other's life, live each other's death. This is true of life and death themselves. (Yeats, *Letters* 917–18)

Conclusion

From the above discussion of Yeats's letters, the changing trajectory of Yeats's political and poetic life can be traced. Yeats's letters, with their inherent open-endedness, unfold different possibilities of self-making within Yeats's poetic oeuvre and thereby challenge the possibility of a uniform, straightforward, ideologically convenient paradigm of biographization. Yeats's life, as was his aesthetic, followed a uniquely self-conscious pattern. This paper has tried to trace different forms of "subjectivation" (M. Kelly 517) in keeping with the changing historical and cultural milieu of Ireland. Despite its persistent quest for a stable poetic identity and autonomous selfhood, Yeats's subjectivity was largely influenced by "his culture, his society, and his social group" (Foucault, "Ethics" 291). To trace how different institutions shaped the contours of Yeats's political philosophy in detail, one must delve into his letters in a more extensive way. They can play a substantial role in unravelling the unexplored nuances of Yeats's selfhood.

End Notes:

[1] Altman's study addresses epistolary fiction; its account of epistolary address and temporality is extended here to actual correspondence.

[2] The pieces were first collected in book form in 1934.

[3] "As a mother names her child / When sleep at last has come / On limbs that had run wild" (Yeats, "Easter, 1916," lines 62–64).

[4] See Gonne's letter to Yeats of 8 November [1916] in Gonne and Yeats, where she judges the poem unworthy of its subject and disputes its claim that sacrifice "Can make a stone of the heart."

[5] The passage is a diary entry of 23 January 1909; Yeats went on to draft his poem "The Mask" after 8 August 1910 (Yeats, *Memoirs* 258–59).

[6] The play was completed in the weeks before Yeats's death in January 1939 and published posthumously in *Last Poems and Two Plays*.

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